

# *Washington Irving and the House of Murray*

J. E. MORPURGO

HISTORIES of publishing houses, the biographies and autobiographies of publishers are, most of them, self-erected monuments to giants of perspicacity and self-denying heroes of patronage; few have added more than scraps to the canons of literary history. On a larger scale only one or two scholars such as the late F. A. Mumby have attempted an overall study of the influence that the commerce of publishing has had on the art of literature. Yet palpably that influence has been great and it is tragic that, at least as far as British publishing is concerned, the possibility of thorough consideration is now lost for ever, destroyed either by German bombers or by the publishers' own actions in preferring the tiny cheques of the waste-paper collector to the space-consuming responsibilities and dubious rewards of posterity.

Happily, 50 Albemarle Street survived the Blitz. With one notorious exception — the wilful destruction of Byron's memoirs — the House of Murray has been careful to the point of miserliness with the records of its own achievements, and for literary significance as well as duration those achievements set the firm first among very few equals.

Professor McClary's investigation<sup>1</sup> of the relations between John Murray and Washington Irving can be seen, therefore, as an exercise of some importance. It is a rare foray into the grounds where publishing and literature meet, where publishers sometimes bully authors, occasionally cosset and guide them, and always influence their lives and work. It is an essay in the history

<sup>1</sup> Ben Harris McClary, *Washington Irving and the House of Murray*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1970, pp. xlv + 242. \$8.50.

of American literature and its reception in Britain that is particularly valuable because it is set in times when the perversities of the copyright laws gave to British publishing a significance for American authors far greater than it was to be when those laws had been substantially reformed; in times when the attitude of British experts still set the tone for both critical and public reception on both sides of the Atlantic. It is, of course, a contribution to the study of Irving and of the Murrays.

The opportunities are many and great; Professor McClary loses almost all of them either because he trips over his own technique or because he reaches too high and claims too much.

Describing himself as editor rather than author, he does in fact reproduce a fascinating collection of letters between his principals (and many of them have never before been published), but he weights the letters almost out of existence with scholarly apparatus and then, as if to make up to the reader for his ponderous footnotes, he inserts into the text vignettes of his own composing which read like extracts from a romance novel. ('The dinner was by candlelight, the curtains of the ground floor . . . shut tightly to keep out the sights and sounds of Albemarle Street . . .' Or again: 'A dark stormy night with reverberating claps of thunder sent Londoners, unaccustomed to such loud displays of nature, running for home.')

The bright lights of Albemarle Street seem to blind Professor McClary to the outlines of the London literary scene of which Murray and Irving formed part. Coleridge, Southey, Wordsworth, Hazlitt, Lamb, De Quincey and Carlyle were none of them in the Murray circle or the Murray list, but even in that circle and in that list, after the phenomenal success of *The Sketch Book*, Irving was never quite as notable as Professor McClary imagines — that would be difficult — nor quite as important as he thought himself to be — that would be impossible! A house which published Lord Byron and Sir Walter Scott could be polite and even generous to an author who was at first a good risk, then a creditable addition and at the last a firm and useful ally in the struggle for copyright reform, but whenever Irving strayed outside the literary or social province that the Murrays intended for him they matched his temerity with their arrogance. As for the British of Professor McClary's sub-title ('Geoffrey

Crayon Charms the British') the commentators and readers — to them Irving was at best a curiosity; an American who wrote books that Englishmen bought, and at worst a puffed-up minnow who would do anything so long as he was seen swimming alongside the big fish.

With time Irving forgot the disappointments and the snubs and remembered only the triumphs, so that when he had come to be respected as 'the Sage of Sunnyside' he looked back with delight at a fairy-tale existence in which he had been the Lion of Albemarle Street.

Perhaps most interesting of all the possibilities for considering Irving's British adventures is one that Professor McClary does not study at all: his place in Anglo-American literary history. He was one of the first and by no means the least of American authors who have been attracted by the lodestar of Britain, who have set sail eastwards across the Atlantic without so much as greeting, without so much as noticing, their British colleagues passing them on a westwards quest. He was one of the first and by no means the least of Americans who have failed to understand British society and their own reception in that society. It does not help his reputation to insist that many from Britain have committed in the United States errors of judgement no less startling.

---

*ARIEL, Volume 2, Number 2*

The April 1971 issue will contain articles on translation, including 'Translating Latin Prose' by Michael Grant.

*ARIEL, Volume 2, Number 3*

The July 1971 issue will be a Scottish number. It will contain twenty specially commissioned poems by Scottish poets, and critical articles on Scottish writers.